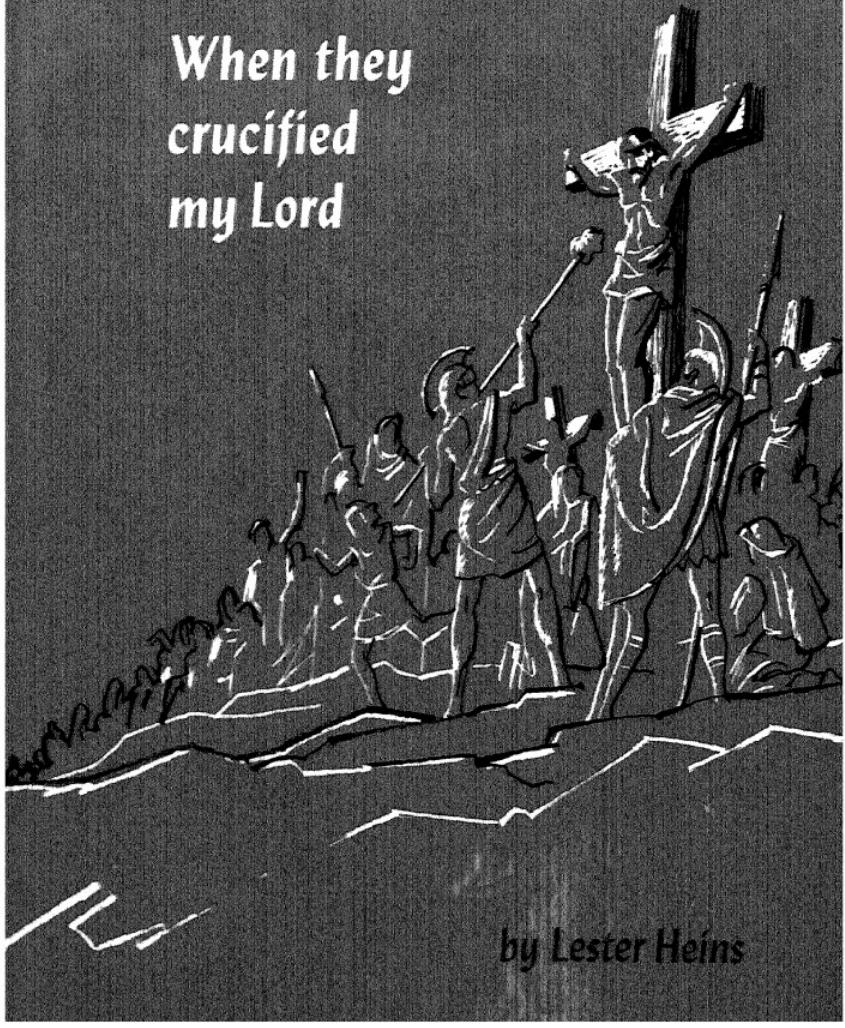


THEY WERE THERE...

*When they
crucified
my Lord*



by Lester Heins

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THEY WERE THERE...

*When they crucified
my Lord*

by Lester F. Heins

Illustrated by Paul Kinnear



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THEY WERE THERE . . .
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Preface

One way to achieve personal identity with a person far away is to write a letter. In the process of composing such a letter there will necessarily be a degree of concentration that can deepen a relationship that already exists.

On the premise that letter writing can be a helpful form of meditation, the chapters of this book are addressed to some of the personalities mentioned in the scriptural accounts of the sufferings, death and resurrection of Christ.

The letters raise questions, most of which cannot be answered this side of eternity. Readers may find these questions stimulating more of the same in their own minds, and this, we submit, is a proper and profitable result of Bible study.

Several of the chapters in this book appeared originally as a Holy Week series of feature articles in the *Toledo Blade*, where the author served as Religion Editor.

L. F. H.

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Chapter I

Your Kind of Ticker Tape



*And when they drew near to Jerusalem and
came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives . . .*
(Matthew 21:1)

TO THE UNKNOWN OWNER
OF TWO DONKEYS
SUBURB OF BETHPHAGE
JERUSALEM

Sir:

How could you have known? Perhaps you are kindly by nature. But your acquiescence in that strange demand by two Galileans for the use of one (or was it two?) of your fine animals is difficult to understand.

Brazenly these fellows went to your hitching rail, untied the prize colt (which you had never before hired to anyone) and began leading it away. Their only explanation: "The Lord has need of it." Such a thing had never happened to you before.

This letter will imagine that it can reach you across 20 centuries. It will look at Palm Sunday events in the perspective of time and distance. And it will raise questions which may never be answered.

Hundreds of millions of people who are called Christians are gathering in places of worship throughout the world today, and without excep-

tion they are reading, meditating, and singing about the events of the day.

Here's a part of the sacred record that is being read:

"And when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If any one says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and he will send them immediately" (Matt. 21:1-3).

You know, better than skimpy records can inform us, of the other strange things that followed. You were among the thousands who watched.

First there was a small band of people following that Galilean preacher named Jesus. As they began moving up the narrow roadway leading to the top of Olivet, in the direction of the Holy City, the crowd began to grow.

By this time Jesus had mounted the colt.

As he did so it seemed like an electric charge surged through the throng.

People began singing and screaming.

It wasn't clear at first what had gotten into them.

Then the familiar words of Zechariah, the

prophet, were recognized. Some of the devout were singing: "Tell the daughters of Zion, Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass" (Matt. 21:5).

People began spreading their garments on the roadway, under the feet of the colt, as if they were welcoming royalty.

Then they began tearing limbs from trees and spreading palm branches along the road, making a carpet of green.

Songs increased in volume, echoing against the city wall, a mile away, and through the great Kidron valley.

"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Matt. 21:9b).

It was your era's version of a ticker tape parade.

Neither Caesar Augustus of your day—nor Col. John Glenn in ours—could have commanded a more enthusiastic following.

Most amazing of all was the way in which the Man on the colt accepted this spontaneous outburst of homage.

He was the picture of serenity.

If he knew what was going to happen in the tragic days to follow, why did he permit this mockery?

If he thought he was leading an effective coup against Roman authority, why did he choose to ride a donkey—lowliest of beasts?

Your quandary about the meaning of these things on that first Palm Sunday is no surprise. After 20 centuries, the paradox remains.

Obviously the multitudes were drawing false conclusions.

Jesus had given ample reason for his popularity. No wonder they wanted him to be their King.

He was their King, of course, but not in the way they thought.

Often he had explained the spiritual character of his kingdom. But their perception of kingship was based on Davidic glory, and the contrasting oppression of Rome under which they lived.

It must have been clear to you, even then, that the Hosannah singers of your day were willing to have Jesus as their King, on their materialistic terms—but not on his spiritual terms.

We haven't learned very much from all of the scholarly study and meditation that have taken place in these 20 centuries.

Confusion still persists on the same point.

People are prone to create God in their own image.

Conjecture turns in all directions in Palm Sunday sermons.

Did the same people who sang "hosannah" join the angry mob that cried for blood a few days later? Some still ask this question.

Was this demonstration planned and staged by those who hated Roman rule? Or was it plotted by those who were jealous of Jesus' popularity?

More questions can be asked than can be answered.

Your impressions, as an eyewitness, might be helpful, if we could somehow recapture them.

We're intrigued, for instance, by the fact that both Mark and Luke say specifically that the colt had never before been ridden.

Doubtless there is some overlooked symbolism here.

Apparently the unbroken animal went along with the proceedings without a single impolite bray, buck, kick, or squeal — characteristics for which colts are noted.

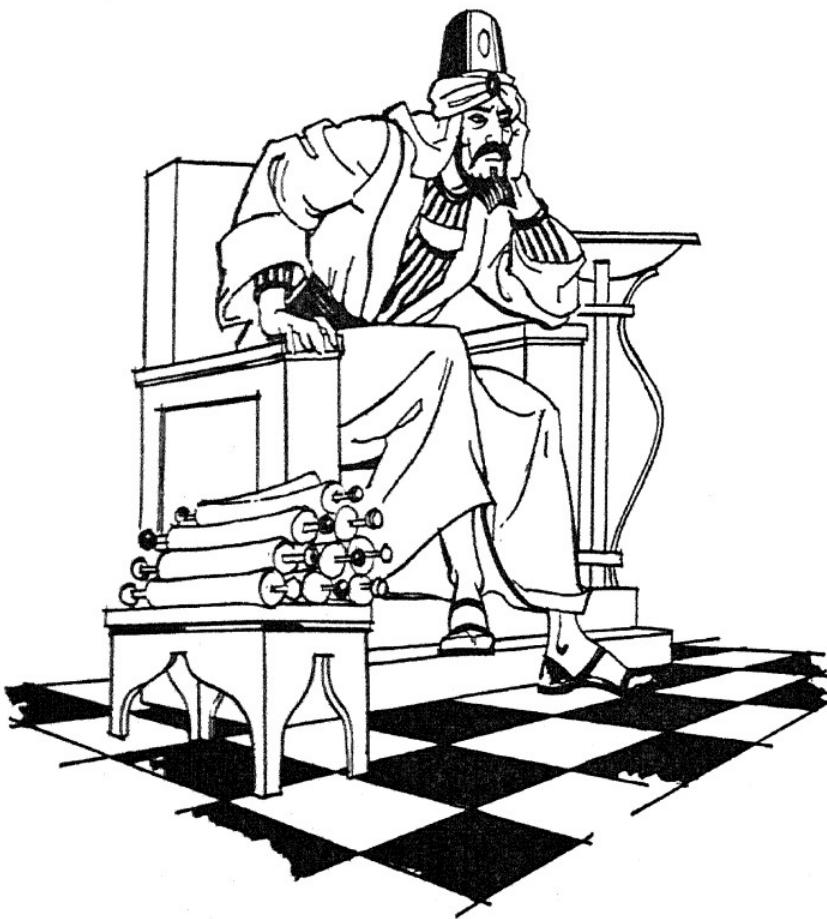
Why was even the donkey's behavior so exemplary?

Was even the colt under some kind of spell?

Your consideration of these matters will be sincerely appreciated.

Chapter 11

It's Your Turn to Answer



Nicodemus, who had gone to him [Jesus] before, and who was one of them [the Pharisees] said to them, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"

(John 7:50-51)

THE HON. NICODEMUS
OFFICE OF THE SANHEDRIN
JERUSALEM

Honorable Sir:

Being somewhat of an artist yourself in the formulation of difficult questions, you will surely be patient with us as we engage in our own kind of long-distance interrogation.

It would probably surprise you to know how thoroughly you have been studied and how fully you have been pictured in the preaching and teaching endeavors of the twentieth century.

How accurately these deductions are, will, of course, continue to be unknown to us, pending your reply to this letter, and that will of necessity be in heaven.

The "de-briefing" interviews to which American astronauts are being subjected after their space orbits, will be like kindergarten quizzes compared with the questions you will be expected to answer on the patio of your particular heavenly mansion.

We have heard devout followers of our Lord discuss the questions they intend to put to you.

Perhaps these inquiries will serve to warn you of the cross-examination you are sure to confront.

"How can a man be born when he is old?" you once asked the Master. And the answer you got seemed to shock you into deep amazement. "How can these things be?" you exclaimed.

What followed then from the lips of Jesus (John 3) is such a rhapsodic summary of the Christian Gospel that most Christians have committed at least part of it to memory. Even children can recite John 3:16. And if Christians spend any appreciable time in Bible reading, they know that this "priceless gem" was spoken privately to you in that midnight dialogue with Jesus.

And that leads us to our first question:

How did John find out so precisely what was spoken?

Obviously, you told him. But when? And why only John? Neither Matthew nor Mark nor Luke even mention your name.

From the structure of John's composition, we are not forced to regard the narration of events as being chronological. Thus we cannot estimate at what point in Jesus' ministry it was that you came to him in the night. It may have been a long or a short span of time between that meeting and your session with the plotting Pharisees.

Whatever the time, the record is complete in this respect, at least: When the occasion arose calling for an exposure of your convictions, you were ready.

John's account of that significant incident (near the end of the seventh chapter of his Gospel) is refreshing reading. Plotting against Jesus had begun in earnest. Apprehension and fear were rife among your angry, insecure associates. Officers sent out to arrest the Galilean Preacher came back without him. "No man ever spoke like this man," they said. Who could know better than you the truth of this appraisal! But the leaders of the Pharisees were furious.

It was time now for you to speak.

You did. And again it was by asking a question.

"Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"

In almost any other context such a question might have been thought reasonable—polished, in fact, with smooth diplomacy.

But it was a scorching rebuke on target in this instance.

Their angry retort, "Are you a Galilean too?" had no sting for you.

To have a reasonable person like you in that company must have been disconcerting to most

of the group. Even if some were contemptuous of your attitude, you had given no cause for suspicion. Your question was in harmony with the highest principles of jurisprudence, which as Pharisees all of you were proud to uphold.

You had, in fact, used the Pharisees' own fuel to heat the ashes that you heaped upon them, and in the process you had not let go your secret.

And that raises a delicate issue.

Please be assured that we hold you in high regard, and mean not to offend you by this question, but why were you so intent on keeping your discipleship secret? It hardly sounds like the courageous conduct we usually associate with heroes of the New Testament.

Preachers who exude evangelistic zeal in their admonitions to "go and tell" seldom make mention of your example. And when they are confronted with this issue their side-stepping reminds us of a dance step.

Quite clearly our problem is not with your behavior, but with something far more imponderable. Why is there such a tremendous variance in what we call "the price of discipleship"? Jesus told a rich young ruler to sell all his possessions, to leave everything of his personal life behind, and then to follow. Almost the same requirement was made of the Galilean fishermen. But there's

nothing in the record indicating that you were given any such instructions.

Your position as a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin was one of honor and distinction. And evidently you were comfortably secure, materialistically speaking. As a secret disciple of Jesus it doesn't appear that you had to give up anything—not even your secret.

That doesn't quite coincide with the usual emphasis we hear from our eloquent pulpiteers. It looks like a cozy arrangement—something far easier to sell than the bleak imperatives we hear so often about "taking up our cross."

We are not accusing you of duplicity. As a matter of fact, we know that being a true disciple in your environment was far more difficult than for those who could openly identify themselves as followers of Jesus. There may have been a temptation, as long as the warm, glowing personality of Jesus was on view, for some to join that company without deep conviction, especially after hearing his eloquent sermons and seeing him work spectacular miracles.

We have "fair weather" followers in our twentieth century life too. "Decisions for Christ," to use a term common to evangelistic preachers, come easily. Certainly it requires no heroic renunciations to become church members. And the

"professionals" among us are respected and even revered for the distinctions our vocations give us. We even presume to use such titles as "the Reverend," or "Doctor" to set us apart.

But to absorb profound Christian truths and to carry the implications of them into meaningful action without the distinctive facade is another matter. Evidently the Master saw that dimension in you and approved.

In this contrast of conditions he taught another truth. We are dead wrong when we speak of discipleship as having a price to which we can contribute.

Only he could pay the price, and he did!

It is an affront of dreadful magnitude when we superficially suppose that any sacrifice of possession or status on our part can have any relationship to our citizenship in the kingdom of our Lord.

If it seems to you that we have presumed to answer our own questions, please be assured that we shall be anxious for you to elaborate when we meet.

Chapter III

You Were the Silent Host



Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

(John 12:1)

LAZARUS OF BETHANY
HOUSEHOLDER
JERICHO ROAD JUNCTION

Sir:

Your devoted sisters, Mary and Martha, are well-known personalities in the available literature we have about your generation.

Why do we know so little about you?

It seems, from the scriptural accounts, that you would have been in a position to leave some profoundly significant memoirs.

Your home was the favorite guest house of Jesus.

He spent his evenings with you in those frightful days after Palm Sunday.

He called you back to life after you had been dead four days.

Yet from you there is no word. The four Gospel narratives fail to attribute a single quotation to you.

There may be practical (and providential) reasons for the curtain of silence which the centuries have drawn.

The four Gospel writers have given us a considerable volume of information about those days.

Jesus' sharply critical discourses, and his prophecies of doom are preserved in adequate detail, with the four sources providing at least a partial cross-reference that is helpful.

But the fact remains that close study of what has been written always raises more questions. Just to raise these questions is an exercise in devotion.

How did you interpret his words about the coming doom?

Much of the destruction which he prophesied can be seen as fulfilled when the Roman army laid waste the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

But his words implied much more. These words, for instance: "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Luke 21:25-26).

Atomic scientists in the twentieth century have made those words seem credible to many who formerly gave them no mind.

You were eating dinner with Jesus, according to John's record, when your sister Mary anointed the Master's feet with expensive perfume, incurring the wrath of Judas Iscariot, who said,

"Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"

Your own version of that briefly told episode would be most interesting.

It is only in John's Gospel that reference is made to the fact that your own life was endangered. Hatred of Jesus had reached such an intensity that it was directed at his friends as well. John says your assassination was planned.

Having once visited that mysterious realm, and having returned, how did you view the prospect of going through death again?

It was in connection with your first brush with death that Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

Mysterious words! Who could speak more authoritatively than you, Lazarus, about what he meant?

Chapter IV

You Felt His Wrath



It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you make it a den of robbers.

(Matthew 21:13)

CONCESSIONAIRE
THE OUTER COURT
TEMPLE AREA
JERUSALEM

Sir:

It's a little late for second guessing, since your ill-fated business boom is screened by 20 centuries of history.

Your cash losses must have been considerable in that spectacular whipcord raid on your money exchange tables the early part of that memorable week which began with Palm Sunday.

If you had been familiar with the sermons which the Galilean named Jesus had delivered to multitudes in three years of itinerant preaching, you might better have been able to anticipate his disapproval.

Commercialism in the sacred precincts near the temple had grown beyond the bounds of propriety.

"And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-

changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons," according to Matt. 21:12.

His emphasis always had been on things spiritual.

"But seek first his [your heavenly Father's] kingdom and his righteousness," Jesus had said, "and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matt. 6:33).

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:19-21).

Then there was that skillfully laid trap on the subject of taxes to Rome, and his stunning response: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21).

Form for form's sake came repeatedly under his verbal lashings.

Tension was mounting during those days, as you well remember.

In a way no one had anticipated he took charge. And there could be no question about his popularity with the people.

Time was short for him. The noise and smell

of the market so near the Temple's Holy of Holies, was a sacrilege—obviously profane.

Involved, as you were, it may have been difficult for you to see this infraction.

It was a convenience you were offering. The trade was appreciative, and the profits were good.

Practical considerations always have had a tendency to get in the way of religious devotion.

It happens in a million ways among members of twentieth century churches. A slight indiscretion leads to greater ones. Easily formed habits become stoutly defended traditions. And so it goes.

We can't help wondering how you reacted to what happened.

Did you accept the criticism, and change your policies?

Or were the vendors back at their old stands as soon as the damage could be repaired?

We have noted that the streets of Old Jerusalem are still beehives of business activity, and it is a bit shocking to find that there are large signs over some counters reading "Money Changer."

Chapter V

You Felt His Power



And one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him.

(Luke 22:50-51)

**PRIVATE MALCHUS
PALACE GUARD
HIGH PRIEST COURT
JERUSALEM**

Sir:

You went to Gethsemane cocky and arrogant about the job you and your buddies had to do—simply to serve an arrest warrant.

But when you returned you were thoroughly confused.

Others have had that problem in being confronted by Jesus, although none under quite the same circumstances.

There had been little reason to expect resistance in the arrest of Jesus. The ridiculous skirmish of small arms, in which you lost an ear at the hands of impetuous Peter, swinging his sword wildly, was an explosion of suppressed emotions.

With blood streaming from the side of your head, Jesus—the man you came to arrest—reached out his hand, touched you, and your wound was instantly healed.

It is interesting to note that this amazing miracle is recorded only by St. Luke (who wasn't there),

although each of the other three Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and John) tells of the injury.

Matthew and John, presumably, were present. Mark supposedly chronicled the memoirs of Peter. But Luke's information was gleaned years later on a research project of his own.

Could it be that you were among those interviewed by Luke in preparation for his contribution to the New Testament?

It seems reasonable. You would have remembered, while the excited apostles taking part in the skirmish might have overlooked that phase of the incident. (Maybe they didn't actually believe their eyes.)

After your experience in the garden you probably had little heart left for what followed. You saw him quell the disturbance, dismiss his small band of followers, and volunteer for the fateful ordeal which he seemed to know was coming.

If, unhappily, you were one of those assigned to administer the whip-lashes at the flagellation ordered by Pilate, you must have bled inwardly with pity and remorse for your part in it.

But your deeds were not your direct responsibility. Jesus administered to you (and the others) another miracle of healing—spiritual healing—when on the following day he prayed from the

cross "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

One might wish that St. Luke had told us more.

Until that night you may not have known anything about Jesus. Then came the word to your company to go out and arrest a trouble-making evangelist whom one of his own followers (Judas Iscariot) had agreed to betray with that infamous kiss.

You wouldn't have heard anything favorable about the Galilean itinerant under those circumstances, and a typical "arresting officer" attitude on your part would have been expected.

In view of what happened you had to readjust your views.

It's a long distance between the first and final attitudes which you (and millions since) had to span. In between there is inevitable confusion.

Devotional services in Christian communities throughout the world today are aimed at helping people span the same broad chasm.

So many things happened that evening (Thursday, as nearly as Scriptures and tradition can determine) that it is small wonder your own startling experience is overshadowed.

Earlier that evening Jesus had given an object lesson in humility by taking on the servant's role

and washing the feet of his confused disciples. Then he instituted the Lord's Supper and went to Gethsemane for his hour of prayer before the rock.

After this he was ready. You can probably still hear his question "Whom seek ye?" And his ready offer of himself, "I am he."

Chapter VI

Your Secret Is Secure



And a young man followed . . .

(Mark 14:52)

ONE ANONYMOUS YOUTH
LAST SEEN IN VICINITY OF THE
HIGH PRIEST's COURT
JERUSALEM

Sir:

Boys are boys, always.

In the night of sacred memory, which millions of Christians throughout the world remember solemnly during Holy Week, your near brush with authority almost escapes attention.

Only the most scholarly pause to ponder over the episode, of which the Bible says:

“And a young man followed him [Jesus], with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked” (Mark 14:51-52).

Obviously you eluded your pursuers.

Your name has remained your secret for 20 centuries.

Those who examine Holy Writ carefully are grateful for this fragmentary human interest gem.

Nothing could be more natural than for a “young man,” of whatever age, to be alert to night-time excitement in the city streets.

A picture forms easily.

The street is a narrow canyon. A unit of the High Priest's palace guard, armed to the teeth, moves noisily over cobblestones.

From dark windows, rooftops, and every available vantage point the eyes and ears of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of curious people are alert.

The city is crowded because of the approaching Passover celebration.

The soldiers have a prisoner.

Word of the Prisoner's identity sweeps through the hostelries and the sleeping quarters of the pilgrims. "They have arrested Jesus."

If it was necessary for you to break the curfew in order to follow the events, you may be sure that millions since your day have been able to understand and sympathize.

It gets chilly at night during this season in Jerusalem, and you seized the first garment you could reach, to serve as a wrap.

Lucky for you that you had such a wrap. It made your leap to freedom easy when the annoyed sentry made his grab for you.

Uniforms and authority, it seems, make a lot of men forget that they were boys once. On our street recently a small boy was ordered off public property where he was trying to fly his kite.

Such gruff and surly conduct is revealing—probably the result of suppressed guilt.

You may have been within hearing distance that very night when Jesus explained it all. "This is your hour, and the power of darkness," he said.

Many of your twentieth century admirers have their own coy notions about who you really were. You've covered your tracks well enough so that our theory can never be proved. But we think that you were Mark, the author of what we know as Mark's Gospel.

That's the source of all we know about the incident.

Who else would have known about it?

The incident in many ways seems characteristic of the author of that narrative of the life of Jesus. That writer was a good reporter. Interesting and significant sidelights related by Mark have added color and atmosphere which otherwise would have been lost.

Youngsters (of whatever age) who relish a bit of excitement and are prone to pursue it to its finish will always be grateful for that brief record of your Jerusalem experience.

Chapter VII

You Made a Serious Accusation



*The maid who kept the door said to Peter,
“Are not you also one of this man’s disciples?”*

(John 18:17)

MAID WHO KEPT THE DOOR
COURTYARD OF CAIAPHAS
JERUSALEM

Madam:

“What dreadful language!” you exclaimed.

No wonder you were shocked.

Such rough talk did not belong in this place.

The soft-spoken John, at whose suggestion you had opened your door to the coarse Galilean that fateful night just before the Passover, should have known better than to bring him here.

But don’t forget, please, that it was your accusing finger that roused the anger and stirred the innate defenses inside the man called Simon Peter.

You accused him of being a follower of Jesus!

This was a serious charge.

Men accused of following Jesus have always been in peril.

In your town, within your lifetime, men were stoned to death for this “offense.” And in the generations and centuries that have followed, martyrs in this cause have become innumerable.

You couldn't have known how serious a charge you were making as you watched this unkempt fisherman warm himself over the small fire in your courtyard.

In fact, we wonder, as we read our four source books on this matter, whether it really was an accusation that you voiced. There is no indication that you argued the point or that there was any disdain in your words. You merely stated what you knew to be true.

Could it be that you felt kindly toward Jesus, the innocent Prisoner inside the high priest's palace?

From your vantage point you could have known something about the malicious motives of those for whom you kept the door. You knew their capacity for cruel trickery and unprincipled intrigue.

The thought grows stronger within us that you may have spent an off-duty hour on Sunday in the throng that sang "Hosannah to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Did you, by chance, know the blind man, Bartimaeus, whom Jesus healed?

There were many miracles of healing and other evidence of a deep compassion on the part of Jesus toward the poor and unprivileged, such as yourself. You must have heard him teach, and if

so, you were surely impressed by the clarity of his words and the sense of authority behind them.

From these probable circumstances we derive a growing conviction that you had no intention of embarrassing Peter by naming him as a follower of Jesus.

Then why was Peter so touchy?

Why did he fly into such a rage?

Too much has already been written in efforts to answer these questions. We are interested now in exploring what the effect of his conduct may have been on you.

Did this cowardly denial change your thinking about Jesus and the Way which he had discussed so freely?

Or did it fill you with disgust that a man could turn to treachery so quickly?

Peter's performance was a pathetic thing to see. But the basis of pathos is broadened by the kinship which is established between Peter and the rest of humanity—even including you and me!

We intend no impertinence by suggesting that if you did love Jesus, you were not advertising the fact. Nor do most of us for whom Christian faith is actually a status symbol!

In the twentieth century we have devious and subtle ways of denying our Lord. It is treachery compounded!

Maybe you could understand Peter's weakness and be sympathetic. All of us can find consolation in the weaknesses of each other. We reason that we, at least, avoid the arrogant, self-righteous poise of a Caiaphas or an Annas.

But we'd do well to shun this shelter of mutual weaknesses.

If Peter's foul words offended you, the fact was likely forgotten as you also saw what made him wilt.

"And the Lord turned and looked at Peter."

In that look of Jesus toward the cursing disciple there was an amazing, even an electrifying, charge of compassion.

That capacity which he has to love each of us when we are totally unmasked, when we are miserably unlovely, when self-contempt all but overwhelms us—it is that illimitable degree of compassion which saves us as it saved Peter.

To see that love demonstrated is to open a window to God.

You saw this love, not in Peter's performance, but in that which followed.

The courtyard of Caiaphas was an unlikely place to see what you saw. We live in places like that too.

In some of the circles where we move it is easy to proclaim, and even to demonstrate, our Chris-

tian convictions. In other places we are embarrassed by our faith. We cringe and crawl and hide, as Peter did.

Terrible things were happening inside your courtyard that night. There were all kinds of people there. All of them passed through the door that you were watching. Even Jesus entered there.

It frightens us to think what would have happened to Peter, and to you, if Jesus had not been there. You heard Peter curse and swear that he did not know Jesus. But you also saw him shed those bitter tears. You could hardly have been unmoved.

In that shocking display of inconsistency by Peter your attention was diverted from him to Jesus. Yours was a good vantage point.

Could it be that in the very inconsistencies which weak and insecure followers of Jesus demonstrate there is a testimony of Christ's unfailing love?

Your responsibility was only to watch the door. But in that task you saw the power of God's amazing love.

What was it the psalmist said? "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm 84:10b).

You have reason to thank God, madam, that you were the maid who kept the door.

Chapter VIII

You Saw, You Heard, You Wept



And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry the cross.

(Mark 15:21)

ALEXANDER AND RUFUS
SONS OF SIMON
PROVINCE OF CYRENE

Sirs:

Your names have been immortalized in our Scriptures because St. Mark records them in identifying your father.

No other factual information about you has been preserved. But the fact that Mark mentions your names is enough to stimulate our curiosity.

We are led to wonder what it was that caused the great evangelist to write in this unusual way. Normally your father, Simon, would have been more adequately identified by the mention of *his* father's name.

This reversal of the usual manner of writing could have a number of explanations. But unless you can find a way to span the centuries with a prompt reply to this inquiry, we shall never know the real reason.

It is evident that Mark held you in high esteem and wanted his readers to attach the memory of you to the magnificent service which your father performed for Jesus on the road to Calvary.

We tend to forget that the Gospel records were written from 20 to 30 or more years after the events they describe. Many things had happened in that interval, but nothing could have dimmed Mark's memory, or yours, for that matter, of the dreadful day of crucifixion.

Like Mark himself, you could have been young men or boys ("teen-agers," we'd call them) watching from a safer vantage point when the soldiers forced your strong, courageous father to lift that load from the bleeding back of Jesus.

Assuming that this is valid conjecture, we try to imagine the fears and the distress that must have filled you.

The scene in that narrow street must have been dreadful.

We read often of the shameful, wicked treatment to which the innocent Jesus was subjected.

Devout Christians by the thousands, from all over the world, visit that place, now known as the "Via Dolorosa," trying as best they can to reconstruct the scene and to recapture some of the inspiration and the spirit of penitence that they feel they ought to experience.

The Jerusalem that pilgrims can visit in the twentieth century has the appearance and the atmosphere of antiquity. Pavement blocks are

irregular and well-worn. Stone walls have been nicked and gouged and soiled. Sacred symbols are as crudely made and as badly defaced as those made with vulgar intent.

But even with the suggestions of great age to be found there now, we are well aware of the fact that the Jerusalem of your day was destroyed, that the city was leveled and rebuilt again and again, and that efforts to duplicate the original have not fully succeeded.

But the Mount of Olives has not changed substantially, the Valley of Kidron is still there, and the city wall encloses an area which has obvious authenticity.

These things help to recreate the scene, at least in some slight degree, though no exercise in contemplation on our part could even approach the descriptive image which you could convey if we could span these years.

Emotions of the multitudes had been whipped into an insane fury. The rasping voice of hatred echoed through the stone canyons, muffling the sobs and protests of Jesus' friends. Women overwhelmed by grief were pushed to the side and almost crushed beneath the heavy boots of the soldiers and the guards from the high priest's palace.

You saw, no doubt, that incident when Jesus

stopped and spoke to the women, "Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children."

Your own feeling of helplessness would have been deepened to the point of despair if you were there (as we are supposing) to see your own father brought into the center of the frightful melee.

Mark says that Simon, your father, was "a passerby . . . coming in from the country."

We wonder what it was that brought him to the city. Was he in the employ of a wealthy Judean landowner, assigned to purchase supplies in the city or to market some of the domestic produce?

How is it that the two of you, his sons, were there?

Were there other members of the household also in the party?

Or was your father, possibly, a tradesman who traveled far? This could have explained his designation as a man of Cyrene.

But Mark's way of reporting only the essentials is perhaps wiser. It forces our thoughts to move in more significant directions.

Your father carried the cross of Jesus, literally.

We are often admonished to do the same; but of course it cannot be done in quite the same direct manner.

It is a frightening responsibility, nonetheless.
And few succeed in any significant way.

The fact that Mark attaches your names to your father's deed suggests to us that you were moved by what you saw and heard to make the Christian faith your own.

Mark traveled widely as a witness for the risen Christ.

He needed friends and trustworthy associates, such as we think you were.

It may be that the frightening experiences of your father in Jerusalem were less dangerous and less strenuous than the things that happened to you in the years that followed.

Whatever the true story of your lives may have been, we are grateful to Mark for preserving at least your names.

It was St. John who reminded us that if all the things concerning Jesus had been written, the world would not be able to contain the books. But we can look forward to that realm of timelessness, which we call eternity, where we shall be together with you and all the saints to worship and glorify our King forever.

Chapter IX

You Made His Cross



*For the word of the cross is folly to those who
are perishing, but to us who are being
saved it is the power of God.*

(1 Corinthians 1:18)

TO THE CARPENTER OF GOLGOTHA ROAD
JERUSALEM

Sir:

A man is expected to take pride in his work.

You made the cross on which Christ died.

For you it simply involved doing a job, and collecting your wages. But you weren't proud of it.

Look back through 20 centuries of time, if you can.

It will change your feeling about crosses.

In Old Jerusalem the cross was a fearful executioner's device. None but the most heinous of men were put upon it. As a supplier in that trade you had no need for qualms.

But the cross today has taken on a different meaning. Gilded and studded with jewels, it is viewed and worn as an ecclesiastical symbol—or a mark of faith.

People love the cross; sing about it. One of the most popular religious songs of our day is called "The Old Rugged Cross." Pieces of wood from what many believe was the cross you made (found in the 4th century by St. Helena) are regarded as

the most sacred of relics and imbedded in the altars of some of Christendom's great cathedrals.

You are astonished by this? Rightly so.

People don't normally fondle and cherish things so closely associated with wickedness and capital crime.

We hasten to explain.

You remember the excitement in Jerusalem the week before Christ died. And we venture that you, like others, wished that things had gone differently for the preacher from Galilee. Not even Pilate really wanted it that way.

There were times when you must have felt a twinge of guilt because you had made his cross. In such moments you were getting close to what followers of Christ—we call them Christians—really believe was involved in that crucifixion.

For Christians the crucifixion of Christ was in historic actuality the ultimate struggle between good and evil; between God and anti-God.

The New Testament, written about the things that happened during your lifetime, says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

Christians believe that Christ was God incarnate (the wholeness of divine power and authority in human flesh). And they also teach that his humanity was as genuine as his divinity. "Dual nature," is the theological term they use.

You recall as well as any how submissive he was when it seemed that all the pent-up horrors of hell were heaped upon him. He did nothing to avoid that ghastly experience. And according to the stories about him, he could have done everything.

That's part of the essence of what is called Christian doctrine.

Christ died willingly. In that death he bore both the innocence of heaven and the accumulation of hell's worst.

They say the earth shook when he died. And well it might.

This is being written to you on Good Friday. That's the name given to the day on which Christians commemorate that event. It's a somber day and its solemnity seems to affect even the millions who like to live as though the cross means nothing.

Those who take it seriously try to identify themselves with the agony which the Crucified One suffered. Choirs today are intoning the words "He carried my sins with him there."

Through fasting and other disciplines the faithful have been trying for 40 days to approach that degree of piety by which they involve themselves with his guilt and his pain

When you were feeling uneasy about the fact

that you were the carpenter who made the cross on which he died, you were approaching the penitential level that many are striving for here and everywhere today.

It isn't sympathy. That would be patronizing.

Identity with him! Identity to the point of psychological, mystical union—like the ability of any mother to feel the pain of her suffering child. Prophets had said that a sword would pierce the heart of Mary. You were a witness to that awful moment when it did.

For the devout in every age, his pain has become their pain.

It is in this sense that Christian theology sees in Christ the Universal Man—the one who calls all men to be what he is. Christians say the whole church is his "body"—his living body.

You were engaged in making crosses for Roman executioners, whose business it was to deliver death. It was a carpenter's work.

But when that instrument of destruction was used to crucify the Incarnate One, in whom was all innocence and holiness, the character of the cross itself was changed, and death's ultimate power over human life was crushed.

Maybe these paradoxes have a particular meaning for you.

You see, he, too, was a carpenter.

Chapter X

You Wet His Lips



And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink.

(Matthew 27:48)

MAN WITH THE SPONGE
CALVARY HILL
JERUSALEM

Sir:

Your opportunity to do something for Jesus came late.

From the fact that three of the four evangelists mention your deed with the reed, we judge that it must have been done deliberately in quick response to his cry, "I thirst."

You may even have been criticized for your spontaneous act of compassion. For some of your companions in that ugly business on Calvary, the events seemed still to offer amusement.

"Let's see what will happen next," seems to have been the attitude of the bystanders.

You acted without any instructions.

The vessel full of vinegar was there for quenching thirst.

You actually ran to fetch the sponge, we are told.

The agony of the cross was beyond description. You knew that, just by watching. You also knew

what it was to be thirsty, and the chance to dampen that parched tongue, even for a moment, called forth within you a genuinely good response.

If you had taken more time to think about it, the pressure of your environment might easily have prevented you from doing this good deed.

And what if you had sat unmoved?

Would Jesus have died sooner? Or suffered more?

You didn't know it then, but Jesus was foreordained to die in this cruel way, and he did it willingly. The end was obviously near. The ultimate in painful agony had been endured.

What good did you accomplish, then?

Was your spontaneous act of benevolence a wasted effort?

At the very most, the moistened sponge could have produced only momentary relief.

And if for your instinctive act of mercy you were reprimanded by your companions, you likely were ready to join that perennial human chorus which sings plaintively "What's the use?"

What's the use, indeed!

Your good deed helped you. Not him.

He could not be helped. But don't ever make the mistake of thinking that he was helpless. He could not be helped for helping. His mission was to lift misery and pain from human lives. He did

it by bearing the load alone. You saw him near the crest of the hill. Praise God!

You wetted his lips with a sponge.

You felt good for doing it.

And in the months and years that followed, we suppose, you did many good things in his name.

This letter comes to you out of a religious pattern that is filled with self-deception in this matter of who is helping whom in benevolence works.

It stretches a point unduly to suggest that you are present in the scriptural story for the purpose of teaching us the truth in this area. But if we learn from our own hypothesis, our premise is strengthened.

Our churches continually admonish us to be "doing the Lord's work."

And somehow, although we know better, we allow ourselves to feel as though we are helping God when we obey.

God needs help in our day no more than Jesus did on that memorable day in your experience.

It must have been the Spirit of God that penetrated your being in that moment when you ran spontaneously for the sponge. An infinitesimal impulse, perhaps, like the particle of radio-active fallout on a Minnesota meadow, but still it was the motivating force behind your kindly act.

And it was the grace of God working within you

(in such faint degree) that made you feel good, knowing that you had done what you could. There was no basis for any illusory notion in your mind that you had helped the Victim. He died before your eyes.

The cup of cold water is a word symbol of unselfish service. Given to a stranger, it can, indeed, be hospitality to an angel in disguise.

Jesus said it clearly in these words "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." But we hear those words superficially if we fail to note that not he but we are helped when we perform acts of Christian compassion.

Great needs do plague God's children, and his will for their good is clear. We must learn that exercising God's love is not a law but a privilege; that in such service our needs, not his, are met.

Chapter XI

Your Tomb – Empty Again



And Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb, and departed.

(Matthew 27:59-60)

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA,
COUNCILOR AND LANDOWNER
JERUSALEM

Sir:

The fact that you had made elaborate arrangements for your own burial is a matter of interest for those of us who would like to know you better than we do.

You could elucidate on the subject for us by replying to this letter, and thus earn our eternal gratitude. (It would be eternal, of course, since the temporal state will have vanished when this exchange of messages is accomplished.) But we are not attempting to make a play on words.

We are attempting, rather, to conjure up some measure of the excitement that you must have felt when your hand-hewn tomb in the garden reverted to your possession, as good as new, after you had given it up for the burial of Jesus.

It was a generous gift. Your gracious act shows us that you were dejected and crushed with sorrow over the events which led to the crucifixion of Jesus. The New Testament tells us that you, like

Nicodemus, were a secret disciple of the Galilean Teacher.

There isn't much time during our annual commemoration of the death and burial of Jesus for us to think about the significant part you played in that phase of the Good Friday events. The faithful few who unfailingly hold to a discipline of study and meditation in the closing hours of Lent have acquired an indistinct, but positive, image of you, and perhaps a few grateful thoughts are turned in your direction each Good Friday night as the concluding portions of the Passion history are read. But we don't know you very well.

A shocking thought strikes home if we permit ourselves to speculate on what might have happened to the body of Jesus if you had not been there, ready and willing to do what was necessary to provide a respectful burial. Perhaps the grim alternative was so vivid in your mind at that moment that the ghastly thought actually haunted you.

If this conjecture should turn out to be correct, we submit that several other things about you would be logically implied.

It would be indicative, for instance, of the depth of your loyalty and concern in matters concerning Jesus, for surely a man does not easily give up

something as costly and as carefully planned as a tomb such as yours.

Your insistence that a respectful burial place be provided for Jesus also says something about your attitude toward death. Are we correct in assuming that you, like Nicodemus, who helped you in the hasty burial chores, were a member of the Pharisees, and possibly also the Sanhedrin? We have it on good authority that the Pharisees, as a sect, believed in a resurrection from the dead, as contrasted with the Sadducees, who didn't.

A belief in the resurrection and faith in Jesus as the Messiah likely were parallel concepts in your mind. You couldn't imagine a resurrection without him.

No matter how strongly you held to the Pharisaic doctrine of the resurrection, you had no very vivid idea of what it would be like. That was shortly to be changed for you. At this point it probably was a somewhat academic concept, like that of Martha of Bethany, when her brother Lazarus lay dead in the tomb. Perhaps you had heard about the raising of Lazarus and about Jesus' conversation with Martha at that time. In answer to the Master's question Martha had said, "I believe that he will rise in the resurrection at the last day."

Despite her confession of faith at that time, it

was an astounding experience for Martha to see her brother step forth from the tomb alive. It is an example of what it is to believe and yet have a totally inadequate appreciation of what it is that we do believe. All of us experience such inability to really comprehend.

When we allow these inadequate and distorted beliefs to have a free reign, they stimulate us to do strange things—like arranging for our own burial. There are many people, even in our generation, who go to ridiculous lengths in this matter of disposing of their own mortal remains. Burying a human body in a reasonably respectful way is extremely costly by our standards. Yet almost none of us has the courage to resist the practice.

There is no specific mention in the New Testament that you witnessed the resurrection, or that you saw the risen Christ. But we are confident that both you and Nicodemus were granted this privilege. What an experience that must have been!

Resurrection had new meaning for you after that. It no longer was a dogma to define or to dispute with anyone. It was a fact!

Now you could recall some of the statements you had heard him make. "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? . . . I

will come again and will take you to myself that where I am you may be also" (John 14:2-3).

The facts of the resurrection are preserved for us in the writings of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and also in St. Paul's Letters. But except for a few glimpses of the Easter morning excitement, we are left to use our imaginations about the ecstasy which each of you must have experienced. That's why we appeal to you to give us answers to some of these questions.

Specifically, how did you react?

Did you take part in some of the High Council meetings in Jerusalem, when your associates tried to deal with this phenomenon?

Were you amused, or indignant, when bribes were offered, paying the guards to testify that they had fallen asleep while on duty?

At what time on Easter Sunday morning did you hear about the earthquake and the empty tomb? Did you see the angels?

How fast did news of the resurrection spread through the city?

Was your garden trampled by thousands of curious ones that day, and on the days following?

Did you take up the matter with Pontius Pilate, with whom you apparently had influence?

These are but a few of the things that stir our curiosity.

It is difficult for us to assume that you continued to hide your allegiance to Jesus and to the movement which his death and resurrection triggered in the period immediately following. There were many times and situations when a man of your standing and experience could have given assistance, and we like to think that you were always ready and eager to do your best.

But it may also be that you were ostracized and banished from any position of influence after being identified as a Christian. It occurs to us that you would not have cared greatly about that.

Our curiosity extends even to such a small and unimportant matter as the tomb itself. Did you reclaim it, and possibly even arrange to be buried in it yourself, as you had originally planned?

Why not? It was empty again!

Chapter XII

You Saw Him Alive



When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.

(Luke 24:30-31)

**THE MANAGER
HIGHWAY INN
EMMAUS**

Sir:

Do you remember the day three men entered your cafe and only two went out?

Excitement from the city, seven miles away, had been reverberating in your village throughout the previous week.

The sabbath lull had made you think Jerusalem was calm again until these three fellows entered your establishment.

They were so intense in their discussions that you couldn't help hearing part of what they said.

One of them was unusually calm, serene, and self-assured. Your memory tells you now that you had quickly sensed something strange about him, without knowing exactly what it was.

The other two (one was named Cleopas) were deeply absorbed in the words of the Calm One, sometimes shaking their heads as if to say, "But, of course." Now and again one called to mind a pertinent fact or circumstance which suddenly became meaningful.

Obviously the whole discussion centered around the crucifixion of a Nazarene, named Jesus, the previous Friday.

"It had to be that way," the Calm One said.

Cleopas and his friend had trouble seeing why. Their questions and his answers seemed, from where you sat, to be going in circles, possibly penetrating a little more deeply with each turn—as corkscrews do.

That Sunday was a slow day in your business, especially in comparison with the previous week's rush of Passover pilgrims.

Finally the food was ready and your man set it before them.

For some unclear reason you could not take your eyes off these men.

As you watched, the Calm One took the bread and, in a gesture that seemed routinely natural to him, lifted up his eyes toward heaven, spoke a prayer of blessing, and broke the bread, reaching out with a portion for each.

For only a moment their eyes met in stunned silence.

It was Jesus!

In that instant he was there no more.

"And he vanished out of their sight," says St. Luke 24:31.

The two disciples had recognized him in the way he had blessed the bread.

Clearly visible a moment before—talking, moving, hearing, seeing, understanding, reasoning through deep problems: *gone*.

Gone, but no longer as one who is dead. Absent, yet his presence continuing to be felt.

Excitement reigned. Cleopas and his friend were in a state of utter confusion—unable to believe or to disbelieve. You were somewhat overwhelmed yourself, considering you were merely an uninvolved observer.

The two men left immediately—without eating (or paying for) the food they had ordered. You saw them as they hurried on the road back toward Jerusalem. You shook your head in amazement.

You could have been a key witness in some of the controversies that followed. Perhaps you did speak up. But you had to be discreet. Of the four Gospel writers, only Luke tells of this incident, and his account makes no specific mention of you. Perhaps he was shielding you.

But from the standpoint of objective research, you were in a position to be helpful. You were not emotionally involved. Any reporter would have valued your recollections of that day.

You could hardly have kept silent about what

you had seen and heard. But even if you told the story to all who came that day, it isn't likely that many would have believed. Laughter and ridicule by your customers could soon have silenced even you.

Memories fade with passing time, especially when discretion and expediency are used to pry them loose. Sometimes it seems that even truth can die.

But the resurrection story has not died.

Easter Sunday is the most joyous of religious festivals—and the most widely celebrated. Hallelujah choruses greeted today's dawn on its whole westward sweep around the globe.

Sanctuaries in every Christian community are filled.

Black shrouds have given way to gloriously blooming white.

Symbols of death are replaced by the light of life.

In that Holy City near your village, where it all happened, and in every place where Christians gather, there is a change in mood from Saturday to Easter Sunday.

"Death is swallowed up in victory," said St. Paul (1 Cor. 15:54).

Nothing is known on Easter that wasn't known the day before.

Yet people move more swiftly. They smile.
They sing.

It is, of course, a religious phenomenon, that is neither helped nor hindered by proof or the lack of it. If you chose silence under pressure, why should anyone complain? That's your business.

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is an Easter Sunday bonus, preserved for posterity in St. Luke's 24th chapter.

Pilgrims in Jerusalem walk that road today as they have every year for centuries. There are vendors along the way, selling post cards and souvenirs, and in the village itself there is an inn where weary pedestrians stop for refreshments.

The Calm Stranger of your day is there, too, though unseen, and his message for the customers is the same:

“Because I live, you will live also.”

About the Author

Lester F. Heins has had a many-sided career—newspaperman, public relations specialist, parish pastor, world traveler, and presently, public information director of The American Lutheran Church.

This book is an outgrowth of a well-received series of articles which he wrote for *The Toledo Blade* during Holy Week 1962.

A onetime general news reporter for *The Blade*, Mr. Heins subsequently entered the ministry and served churches in Wayne, Mich., and Toledo before returning to the Toledo newspaper in 1956 as Religion Editor.

In 1960 he traveled 25,000 miles reporting on missionary work in 12 countries in Africa, India, and the Middle East. During this tour he had interviews with Dr. Albert Schweitzer at Lambarene, French Equatorial Africa, and Dr. Ida Scudder, at Vellore, South India. He also covered Holy Week rites in Old Jerusalem. The following year he returned to India to cover the third assembly of the World Council of Churches.

While reporting church news for *The Blade*, Mr. Heins also continued as a clergyman, both as a supply preacher and as a hospital chaplain. He edited the 25th anniversary book of the American Lutheran Church and has written articles for *The Lutheran Standard*, *The Christian Century* and other magazines.

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